DEATH OF AN OLDER CHILD

COMMON PARENTAL GRIEF RESPONSES AND STRATEGIES FOR SELF-CARE

SUGGESTIONS FOR COPING AS A COUPLE/FAMILY AFTER THE DEATH OF A CHILD

I MISS THE GIRL TALK

POEM-VERLA JONES

A NOTE ON GRIEVING: BEYOND TEARS

BETSY’S BEDROOM

MESSAGE OF HOPE-DOROTHY JOHNS

A NOTE ON GRIEVING: BEYOND TEARS

FROM ONE GRIEVING PARENT TO ANOTHER

BOOKS AND WEBSITES

GSS SERVICES

Revised February 2015

A charitable project of Essentia Health Foundation.
SUGGESTIONS FOR COPING AS A COUPLE / FAMILY AFTER THE DEATH OF A CHILD

1. **Resolve**
   To be gentle with yourself and other family members as you adjust to the pain of your loss.

2. **Have family meetings and talk with one another each day**
   Be open and honest about your feelings of sadness, frustration, or guilt. Your partner may also be experiencing some of these feelings.

3. **Respect That Individuals Grieve Differently**
   One partner may cry a lot and want to talk about the death. The other partner may withdraw and ask to be alone. Both of these are normal reactions. Try to accept these differences in grieving and coping strategies.

4. **Communicate What You Need**
   Do not assume that your partner knows how you feel. Ask to be alone, or say that you want to talk about the child who died. Tell your partner exactly what you would find comforting (if you know this yourself) at a given moment.

5. **Remember This Is A Vulnerable Time**
   You may feel irritable. You may be absent-minded or forgetful. You also may feel easily overwhelmed with daily tasks. This happens because the task of grieving consumes so much of your mental energy. Try to accept these changes in yourself and your partner, and help out when you can. Simplify tasks when possible.

6. **Practice Forgiveness**
   Try to forgive irritable or inpatient behavior and apologize when you are the one who was short tempered with your family members. Find safe outlets for expressing anger such as journaling exercises or venting with someone you trust.

7. **Seek Support**
   Grieving parents can support each other. Simple things like holding hands, wiping a tear, or giving a hug, mean so much. Also, develop the support that you need—from friends, a grief counselor, another bereaved parent, or a support group. With both partners grieving, neither may feel they have much to give.

8. **Work Together**
   Work together on a memorial for your child. Include siblings/grandchildren- in discussing special ways of honoring your child who died.

9. **Emphasize the Positive**
   Find time for play and laughter as a couple/family. Praise your partner and yourself for doing the best you are able in a difficult situation.
I Miss The Girl Talk
By Bucky Poppleton

For as far back as I can remember, being a mother to my dolls, caring for pets, and helping younger children were qualities that were very important to me. So it should not come as any surprise that my career choice was preschool, kindergarten and elementary training. My interest in children’s needs led me to become a teacher, consultant and administrator in children’s programs.

However, two very important events in my life overshadow the career experiences: the births of our son and daughter, Eric and Lisa. Being a wife and mother are the two most vibrant roles in my life. The career and volunteer roles were additional choices. Achieving a balance of home, school and work was collaboration for the whole family.

After our daughter had chosen a career in nursing and had gone off to college, we were talking one day, and I asked, “How do you feel about having grown up with a working mother?” With a twinkle in her eye, she replied, “I turned out all right didn’t I?” and, indeed, I was in agreement!

Children grow through various stages. These are positive and not-so-positive times. These are anxious times. All of these experiences are part of becoming an adult. As they grow, they make the most of their own decisions. They make some mistakes. They achieve goals. It’s like a time of rewards—small ones that continue to happen as they strive to become their own person. And there are times when they stumble and find the results less than they imagined.

Parents watch. Sometimes they cannot be a part of these times in their children’s lives, but sometimes they can. Sometimes there can be “girl talk.”

When Lisa was away at college she would call me on Wednesday announcing that she would be home on Friday evening. For two days, I’d rush out to greet her with a big hug. Car doors opened. Laundry bags needed to be carried inside. Doors banged. We were in the laundry room, and the talking had already begun. As we stood together sorting the dirty clothes, we exchanged ideas, laughed, and shared thoughts of both value and fun nothings. These were the times that filled our hearts with wonder, delight, suspense. These were the times when we shared sadness, fears, and anxiety. These were also the times of bold honesty, tears, joy, laughter, dreams.

There were also occasions when we sat together outside on the porch. Lisa on the swing; I in the chair, close by. Lisa would look out over the tree-filled backyard and her dad’s well-manicured green lawn stretching down to the seawall that held back the lake. There’s a quiet and peacefulness here.

This is where Lisa celebrated her twenty-first birthday. We were remembering how her brother (on water skis) brought her a cake with candles that wouldn’t go out. He skied directly to the shore where all the guests were standing and handed her the cake, still dry.

This beautiful back yard is the place where Lisa would have her wedding. Perhaps she would have worn my wedding dress. She wasn’t sure. Yes, I fit. She had tried it on when she was sixteen, and she was still the same size. We even have a fun picture of when she was a “bride” for a few moments. It would have been a magnificent place to join together with another person, to continue their lives together. And perhaps she’d have been a mother. Could she have been a working mother? Of course she could, we agreed.

Lisa, our daughter, drowned on June 11, 1983. I last saw her running down to the lake in her bathing suit on a bright, sunny day. I didn’t know we were saying good-bye.

I miss the girl talk.

When people ask, “Do you have children?” I reply, “Two children; our son, Eric, lives in California; our daughter, Lisa, lives in our hearts.
POEM BY VERLENA JONES
GSS Person to Person Volunteer

Nowhere to run, no place to hide
It’s always there so deep inside

The pain, the grief that never ends
Who are these people we call friends
Some may search for words to say
Others simply stay away

Paint a picture, take a walk
Call me if you need to talk
Go on vacation, get some rest
I know it’s hard but do your best

Do the things you used to do
We are always here for you
They stop by because they care
But are they ever really there?

I know you don’t know what to say
In hopes my pain will go away
It’s my new life, it’s part of me
I’m not the same, I’ll never be

Nowhere to run, no place to hide
He should be here by my side

My son is gone, why don’t you see
I’m standing here but it’s not me
A piece is missing from my heart
From the very deepest part

Nowhere to run, no place to hide
It’s always there so deep inside

You say that time will heal all things
I know that isn’t true
My child is forever gone
While yours is home with you

My last thought before I sleep
The first when I awake
You don’t understand this kind of grief
It’s something you don’t shake

So do stop in when passing by
Just bear with me if I cry
You can’t erase this pain and sorrow
It will still be mine tomorrow

Nowhere to run, no place to hide
Not since the moment my son died

2007
Betsy’s Bedroom
By Dorothy L. Johns (April 2011)

Her bedroom door stayed mostly shut for the first year after her death. Piled inside her room were the sad remnants of our beloved Betsy’s full life—remnants thrown haphazardly and defiantly and with great grief into the empty space: boxes from her Minneapolis apartment; flute and piano music; books; clothing; videos, stuffed animals, games and cards from her hospital stay; furniture moved from our previous house. Opening her door was impossible.

My husband Alan and I had purchased a new house and were in the process of moving when Betsy, our nineteen-year-old daughter, was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia in March 2004. She was a flute-performance major at the University of Minnesota and received her treatment at Fairview University Hospital. It was a difficult time, but friends and family helped with packing up the old house, where we had raised our two daughters, Emily and Betsy, and unpacking the new house, where we were beginning our new lives as empty-nesters.

Betsy died in Duluth in June 2004, three months after her diagnosis. She was in remission but contracted an infection that her chemotherapy-damaged immune system could not fight. The day after she died, Alan and my brother and nephew drove to her apartment in Minneapolis and packed up her life. “It was,” Alan says, “a horrible day.” On their return, they threw boxes and bags into Betsy’s room in the new house, a room where she had stayed for only a few nights, adding to the stacks that had been moved from the old house.

A week or two after Betsy’s funeral I was somehow able to dig through these stacks and find mementoes that I knew her sister, cousins, and friends would want. I also made a pile for Goodwill—things we just couldn’t bear to have around. As often happens for a week or two after death, I moved on autopilot, not thinking, not feeling. Then, I shut her door.

We quickly sold her car—it was too painful seeing it sitting in the driveway, driverless—but watching a young woman about Betsy’s age with the same long brown hair drive it away took our breath away. How could someone else be driving her car?

Soon after her death, also moving on autopilot, Alan made a CD of Betsy’s flute performances then built a wood and glass case for her flute, lined in blue velvet, that we display on our living room mantle. We still can’t listen to the CD, but we take turns dusting her flute.

Her bedroom door stayed shut, except for one evening that November, shortly after what would have been her twentieth birthday, a birthday that she and I share. My brother and his wife carried into the house a beautiful cedar chest he had built for Betsy. We were overwhelmed with both gratitude and grief—so touched by his gorgeous craftsmanship, and so distressed that Betsy would never see it. We put it in her room and once again, closed the door.
I opened her door months later when two dear friends arrived on the one-year anniversary of Betsy’s death to help me go through her things and organize her room. They knew it was something I needed to do. And they knew they needed to be with me. We spent the day unpacking, sorting, and cleaning. We cried but we also laughed. What were the remainders of our precious daughter’s life? Lots of novels, because Betsy loved to read. Music and French textbooks. Notes from her boyfriend. Journals. Dave Matthews and Jean-Pierre Rampal CDs. Trendy clothes, purses, and shoes—Betsy was a fashion plate. I buried my face in her clothes, because they smelled like her. A high-school letter jacket. Photos. A camera, a smoothie maker, a computer. A hairbrush tangled with her soft brown hair stolen by chemotherapy. I found her purse and inside it discovered her driver’s license—still current—and a grocery list in her sloppy handwriting, made a week or two before her death, when we all thought she was going to beat the odds and survive her poor diagnosis. She was going to buy broccoli and Kleenex and great tea.

Stacks cluttered the room: a pile of things for her sister, another for Goodwill, and a final pile of things we wanted to save forever. Especially meaningful items I placed into the cedar chest. I neatly hung her four prom dresses, her graduation robe and honors rope, and her letter jacket in the closet. Then, once again, I closed the door. Extra boxes we stored in the furnace room, next to the bins holding both girls’ baby clothes and toys and their schoolwork and recognitions from kindergarten through college.

Seven years later, Betsy’s bedroom door remains mostly closed, protecting the colors our beloved daughter will never see, the bed she’ll never again sleep in, the clothes she’ll never again wear, the books she’ll never again read, and the music she’ll never again play. Maybe one day soon we’ll be able to keep it open.

Dorothy L. Johns
April 2011
I have received blessings from the death of my beloved daughter Betsy. These are the hardest but truest words for me to share with you. I have received knowledge of suffering, and I have received compassion for others’ suffering. I have received the blessings of bonding with others who are grieving, especially those grieving for the loss of a child; as you all know, an instant bond is formed among bereaved parents. I have received awareness of the fragility and brevity of life. I have received appreciation for the beauty of our natural world and its cycle; birth, life, and death, in an eternal circle. I have received deep gratitude for the life of Betsy—I would rather have had her and lost her than not have had her at all. I have received continual and renewed gratitude for my older daughter, Emily, who was married in June without her sister at her side. I have received the blessings of our dear friends and family, who stood with us and continue to stand with us in our dark hours, and the blessings of my compassionate grief counselor Gina and my fellow travelers in the parents Grief Support Group, led by the blessing of my angel and friend Julie Eckman. Of course I would give up each and every blessing in one second to spend one minute with Betsy. She was my beautiful soul mate, born on my birthday. She was nineteen, just beginning a promising life as a flute performance and French major at the University of Minnesota, when the thief leukemia stole her from us and stole her from herself. But in this life, I won’t spend any more time with her. She won’t come home to us.

I recently read a grief memoir by Gail Caldwell, and I underlined this passage: “I had a friend who years before had lost her firstborn when he was an infant, and she told me one of the piercing consolations she received in her early grief was from a man who recognized the fierce loyalty one feels to the dead: ‘The real hell of this,’ he told her, ‘is that you’re going to get through it.’ Like a starfish, the heart endures its amputation.” And this brings me to the final blessing I have received from Betsy’s death: I am getting through it; I am surviving it, we as a family are surviving it, and I have received the blessing of a new way to live in this world without one of my daughters; without her future, without half of my future.

Shortly after her death I began exploring ways of surviving her death, when I really didn’t want to survive. I prayed. I read, and I wrote: I
wrote in my journal, I wrote poetry, I wrote the story of Betsy’s illness and death, and I wrote letters to other bereaved parents. I learned to knit. I sought the comfort of food. I saw psychological counselors and spiritual counselors. I continued my career as an English teacher, then I left my career. Everything helped a little, nothing helped a lot. Then, I discovered yoga. Yoga changed who I am and changed the course of my life. *Yoga* is a Sanskrit word that means “to yoke” or “to join,” and it connects the body, the mind, and the spirit; it connects the human and the divine. I discovered a small measure of peace when I practiced yoga—it’s indescribable, but it’s true. The *asanas*, or postures, do more than stretch and strengthen; somehow, they bring me closer to my better self and they connect me with the divine. A daily practice has helped me focus on and appreciate each moment of my life, as I experience each moment, not on past grief or future grief. With the goal of helping others who are grieving or suffering, I completed yoga teacher training this past spring and became a certified yoga teacher.

Ironically, Betsy would have loved yoga; I even wonder if its healing powers would have helped heal her cancer. It has soothed my grief—not made it disappear—of course not. I continue to daily wear my grief like a heavy black cloak, but yoga allows me to sometimes remove this burden or forget I’m wearing it.

Ben Wolfe recently included this quotation in an issue of Grief Notes: “Parental grief is boundless. It touches every aspect of the parent’s being…Despite the volumes of work on grief, the experience of grief seems to defy description. Definitions touch the fringes of grief but do not embrace its totality or reach its core…Grief is a binding experience; its universality binds sufferers together.” Each of us is surviving our child’s death, and we are bound together with the others who are wearing the same black cloak that you’re wearing and that I’m wearing. I pray that each of you—my dear circle of bereaved parents who are struggling every minute of every day to live in this world without your lost children—also find a way to sometimes remove your cloak of grief and receive blessings.
A NOTE ON GRIEVING: Beyond Tears

-There is nothing that can prepare you for the enormity of grief. It seems impossible to handle at times. Grief is ongoing, but it will change in manner of expression and intensity. Grief affects the head, the heart, and the spirit.

-Some parents may not be able to process their grief after the death of a child. Shock and numbness may result immediately after losses and for some it may continue for many months or even years.

-Everyone must go through life’s journey in an individual manner. The process of grieving a loss isn’t something you have to “get over” with time; it is something you will always go through and process with time.

-Parental grief may be accompanied by many uncomfortable feelings. They may include a sense of despair, a sense that life is not worth living, confusion, and anger. These feelings are all normal and occur in many grieving parents.

“The repercussions of our children’s deaths will echo forever in our lives and those of our close family members. The bitterness and the fury will diminish, but they will never completely disappear. But the one relationship that has never faltered has been that which we had and continue to have with our deceased children. That closeness, which we probably took for granted when our children were alive, has grown to the point that they are forever with us and within us.”

-Excerpt from Beyond Tears by Ellen Mitchell
RESOURCES

Grief Support Services Library has these titles and others for checkout. Call 218-786-4402 for library hours.

When the Bough Breaks by Judith Bernstein
The Worst Loss: How Families Heal from the Death of a Child by Barbara Rosof
Life After the Death of my Son by Dennis Apple
Surviving the Loss of a Child by Elizabeth Brown
Beyond Tears: Living after Losing a Child by Ellen Mitchell
Healing a Parent’s Grieving Heart by Alan Wolfelt
Five Cries of Grief by Merton & Irene Strommen
The Lessons of Love by Melody Beattie
The Journey Through Grief and Loss by Robert Zucker
I have No Intention of Saying Good-bye by Sandy Fox
The Grieving Garden-Living with the Death of a Child by Suzanne Redfern & Susan Gilbert
The Bereaved Parents’ Survival Guide by Juliet Cassuto Rothman
Help Your Marriage Survive the Death of a Child by Paul Rosenblatt
For Better or Worse: A Handbook for Couples Whose Child has Died by Maribeth Wilder-Doerr
Grieving for Dummies by Harvey Greg
Dear Parents: Letters to Bereaved Parents by Centering Corporation
Men Coping with Grief by Dale Lund

WEBSITES

www.essentiahealth.org/stmarysmedicalcenter/griefsupportcenter.aspx
www.alivealone.org
www.compassionatefriends.org

St. Mary’s Grief Support Services * 407 East Third Street, Duluth, MN 55805
(218) 786-4402 / FAX (218) 786-4067 * GriefCenter@essentiahealth.org